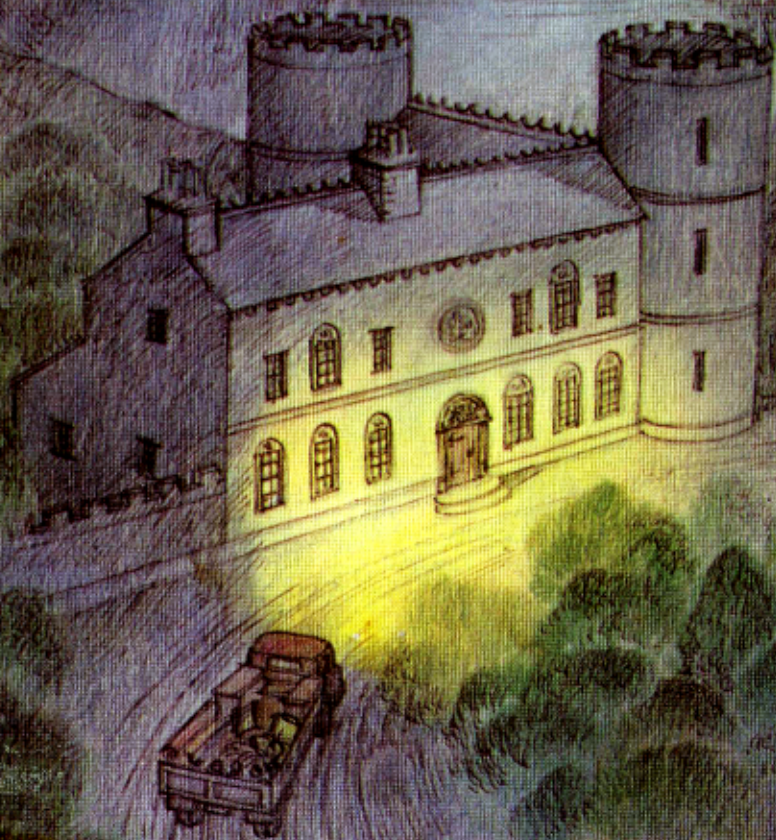


Tim and the Hidden People

Riding into Danger

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook



Riding into Danger



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The wind was still blowing when they woke in the morning. The door below them banged in the wind.

The sound of it woke Jeremy, and when Jeremy was awake, no one else had much chance of sleeping any longer. He gave Nicola's hair a pull, to make sure she was awake too.

Nicola woke up at once. She sat up and listened for a moment. The door banged again in the wind. Sebastian was sitting by the window, looking out. Nicola ran over to him. She took one look outside, and ran back to Tim and shook his arm.

"Wake up, Tim," she cried. "Wake up! The wind's blowing. It's blowing up from the south. We've got to go. The wind witches will be here."

Tim sat up.

"It's all right, Nicola," he said. "The witches won't come here again. They didn't see us. They don't know we're here."

Nicola's face went white.

"What do you mean, the witches won't come here *again*?" she asked.

"They were here last night," said Tim. "They were below in the barn. Sebastian and I saw them through a crack in the floor. But they didn't see us, and they flew off on the wind."

"But – but that means they're ahead of us," said Nicola.

Tim nodded.

“We’ll have to be all the more careful, that’s all,” he said. He tried to sound as if that was all they had to do – as if the witches would never find them, if they were careful.

Nicola sat down on a bale of hay, and looked at him with wide open, frightened eyes. Even Jeremy stood still.

Tim got up. “Don’t worry,” he said. “We’ll get there. The witches don’t fly in the daylight, do they?”

Nicola shook her head.

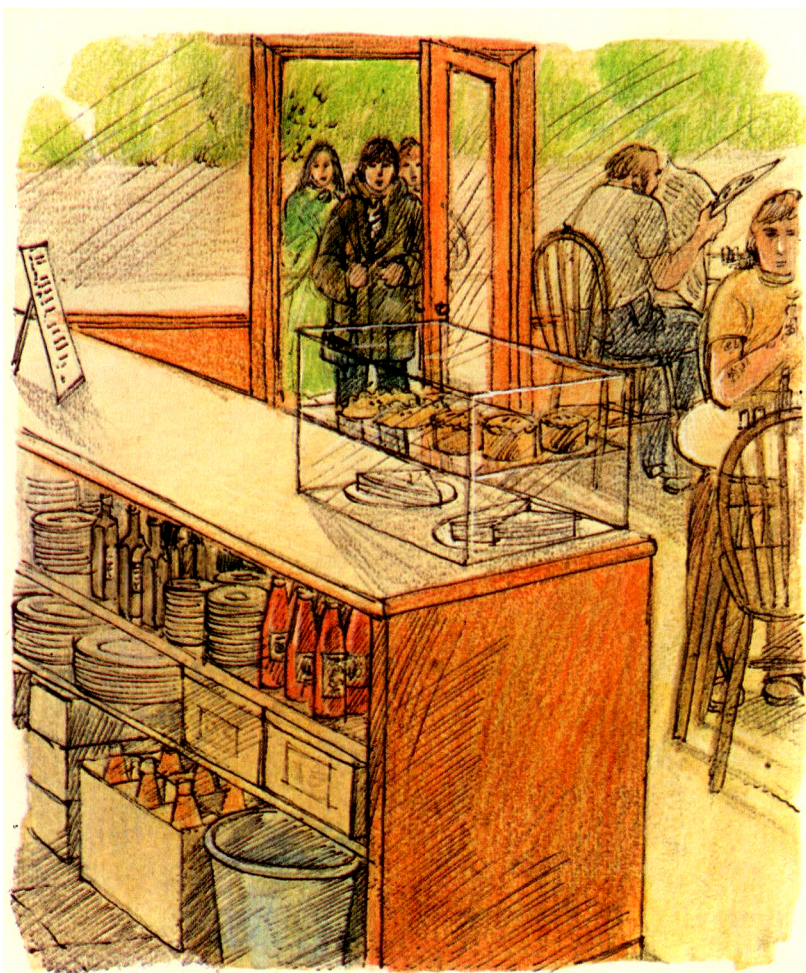
“Then we’ll travel in the daylight,” said Tim. “Come on. Let’s go now. Let’s get some breakfast. We could do with something hot. There was a café by that telephone box. I’ll buy some breakfast. I’m not invisible now, and I’ve got the money. Come on. We might find a lorry at the café, too, and get another ride.”

Sebastian purred loudly, and ran to the door.

They went out of the barn, down the steps, and over to the road. Tim looked carefully up and down the road, but there was no one in sight. They climbed over the gate, and walked along to the café.

The café was open. There were three or four lorries parked outside.

“You come in when I open the door,” said Tim. “I’ll get us all something to eat. You find an empty table, and sit down. But don’t go moving the chairs, or anything. Remember, no one can see you. I’ll bring the breakfast over to the table.”



Tim picked up Sebastian, and put him inside his jacket. Sebastian pushed his head out, so that he could see. Tim opened the door of the café, and walked in. Nicola and Jeremy followed him.



There was a counter on the right, and a lot of tables on the left. Tim went to the counter without looking round. A cheerful looking woman was standing behind it.

“What’s for breakfast?” asked Tim.

“Anything you like,” said the woman. “Egg and chips, sausages, bacon – what do you want?”

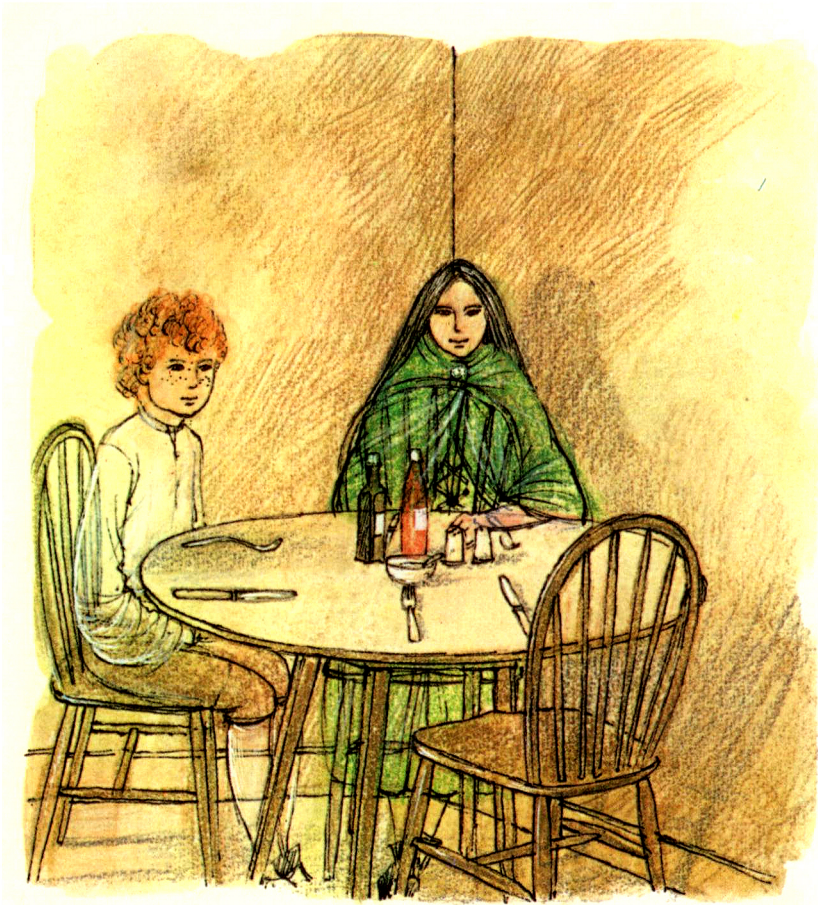
“I’ll have seven sausages and a plate of chips,” said Tim.

“*Seven* sausages!” said the woman. “You *must* be hungry.”

“One of them’s for the cat,” said Tim.

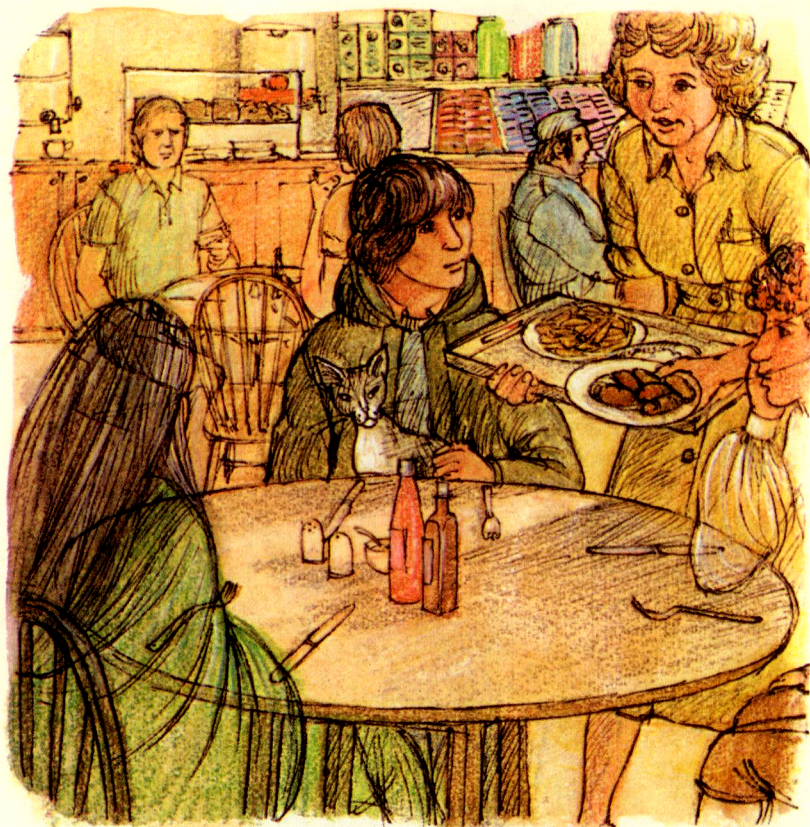
The woman laughed. “I’ve got a nice bit of fish left from last night that’ll do for the cat,” she said. “You can have that for nothing. I’ll get you six sausages and the chips. You go and sit down. I’ll bring them.”

She went through a door behind the counter.



Tim turned, and looked at the tables.

There were men sitting at most of them, and Tim guessed that they must be lorry drivers. Nicola and Jeremy had found an empty table in a corner. They had been able to slip on to the chairs without moving them, and they were sitting watching him.



Tim went over to the table. There was one empty chair left, and he sat down on it, with his back to the room. He didn't want to look at the children, so he opened his jacket, so that Sebastian could sit on his knee. He sat stroking Sebastian, until the woman came across and put two plates down in front of him. One had six sausages on it, and the other was a big dish full of chips.

“There you are,” she said cheerfully. “If you eat all that, you’ll be able to run ten miles without stopping.” She put a tin plate full of fish on the floor.

“That’s for the cat,” she said.

Sebastian jumped down from Tim’s knee.

“Thanks very much,” said Tim.

One of the men got up to go out, and the woman went back to the counter.

Tim looked round. No one was looking at him. He slipped two sausages across the table to Jeremy, and two to Nicola, keeping himself between them and the rest of the room.

They ate the sausages in their fingers, and Tim pushed the dish of chips into the middle of the table, where they could all reach them. Then he picked up his own knife and fork, and began to eat.

They had just finished, and the plates were empty, when the woman came back with a mug of tea.

“You’ll want this,” she said. “I’ve put the sugar in.”

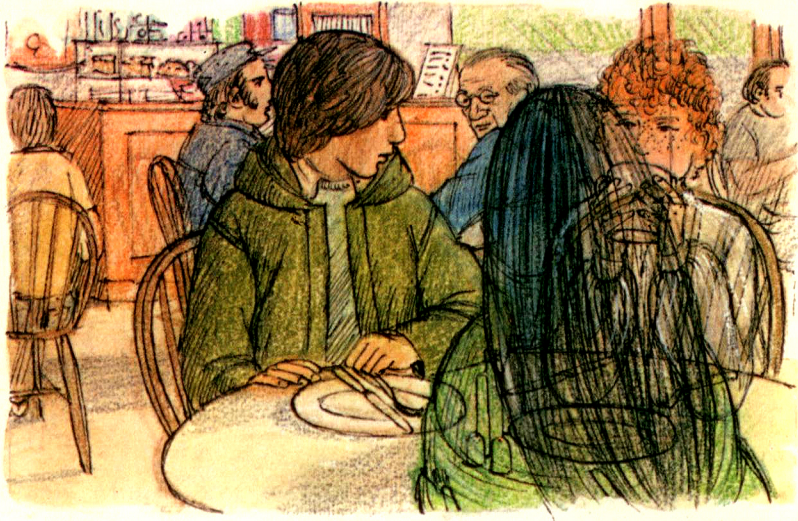
“Thanks,” said Tim.

“Do you live near here?” she asked. “I don’t remember seeing you here before.”

“Not very near,” Tim said.

“Got a cup of tea for me, Mary?” one of the drivers called.

“Coming,” answered the woman, and went back to the counter.



Tim gulped a mouthful of tea, and then pushed the mug across the table to Nicola. Nicola waited till no one was looking, took a quick drink, and pushed it to Jeremy.

As Jeremy lifted the mug to drink, Tim saw one of the men at another table look over towards them, and then look away. He was an old man, and he was wearing blue overalls. He was sitting at a table with one of the lorry drivers, and Tim wondered who he was. He looked back, and saw that Nicola was watching, too.

“He can’t have seen Jeremy drinking,” whispered Tim. “He’d have said something.”

“Not if he’s one of the Strange Ones,” Nicola whispered back. “I saw him look this way before. I think he can see us.”

Just then the woman called Mary came back to the table.

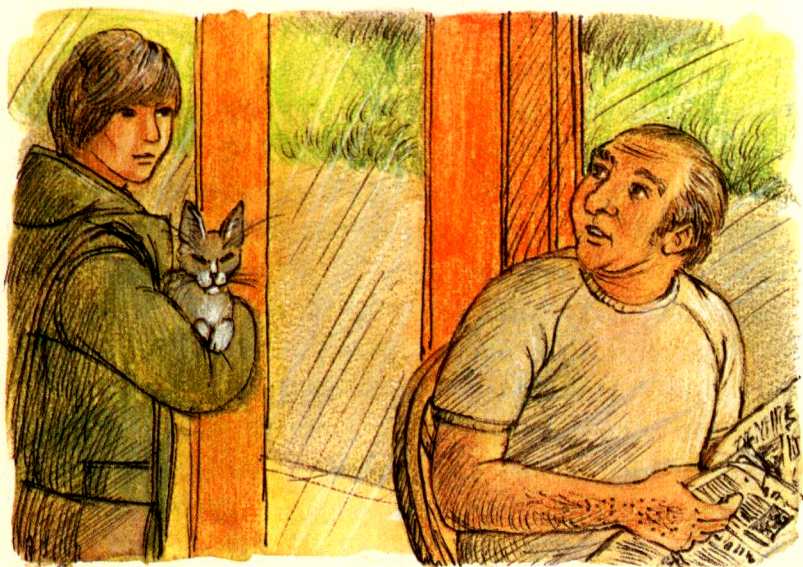
“Where are you off to?” she asked.

“Just up north,” said Tim. “How much is it?”

He picked up Sebastian and went back to the counter with Mary. When he had paid for the breakfast, he turned to go out.

“Just a minute,” said one of the lorry drivers. “There was something on the radio this morning about a boy – the police want to find a boy. Something about a lorry being hi-jacked. You didn’t have anything to do with that, did you?”

“I’m just going north with some friends of mine,” said Tim. “And I’ve got to go now.”





“I’ll give you a ride, boy,” someone said just behind him. He turned round. It was the old man in the blue overalls.

“I’ll – I’ll be all right,” said Tim. “I don’t want a ride.”

“I’d call the police, Mary, if I were you,” said the lorry driver. “Someone made a ’phone call from here about that lorry yesterday.”

“The local policeman’s a friend of mine. I’ll take the boy along,” said the old man. “You come along with me. See you tomorrow, Mary.”

He nodded to the woman, put a pound note down on the counter to pay for his breakfast, and went out with Tim. Nicola and Jeremy slipped out behind them.

“This is my lorry,” said the man, as soon as they got outside. “Come on inside with me. There’s room for you all in the cab—room for all three of you, and the cat too.”

Tim stopped dead.

“Who are you?” he said.

“I should ask *you* that,” said the man. “My name’s Simon. But who are you, and what are you doing with two of the Hidden People?”

Tim stared at him and said nothing.

Sebastian jumped out of Tim’s arms, and stood on the ground, looking hard at Simon.

“So the cat’s a Strange One, too!” said Simon. “I thought as much, but I couldn’t get a good look at him. Come on into my cab, out of this wind, and tell me all about it.”

Simon began walking towards an old lorry.

Tim looked back through the glass door of the café. The woman and the lorry driver were still talking, and the woman was pointing towards him.

Tim looked at Nicola and Jeremy.

“We’d better go with Simon,” he said. “I think he’s all right.”

Nicola nodded. “Sebastian thinks so, too,” she said. “Look!”

Sebastian was standing with Simon by the lorry, looking back at them.

“Coming?” called Simon.

“Yes,” said Tim.



They ran over to the lorry, and climbed into the cab. The wind from the south was still blowing hard, and they were glad to get inside.

“We’ll get a few miles away from here, and then I’ll stop, and you can tell me all about it,” said Simon. “Those folk in the café will call the police soon, if we don’t go.”

He started the lorry, and they set off along the road.

Simon talked cheerfully to them, telling them about his work. He reminded Tim of Mr. Penny. His son had a shop in the town, and Simon grew vegetables, and took them to the shop in his lorry.

Tim and the children didn’t talk very much, but Tim began to feel better. He began to feel that he could trust Simon.



They came to a little wood. There was a place near it where Simon could pull his lorry off the road, and he pulled in, and stopped.

Simon switched off the engine, and looked at Tim.

“Well, now,” he said. “Well, now – tell me all about it. You’re not one of the Hidden People, but you’ve got two of them with you. You can see them, so you must have a magic key or a magic coin. And that cat is one of the Strange Ones. What are you all doing? It isn’t safe for you to be about just now. I saw the wind witches last night, riding the wind and travelling north. They were flying low along the roads, looking for someone. Were they looking for you, by any chance?”

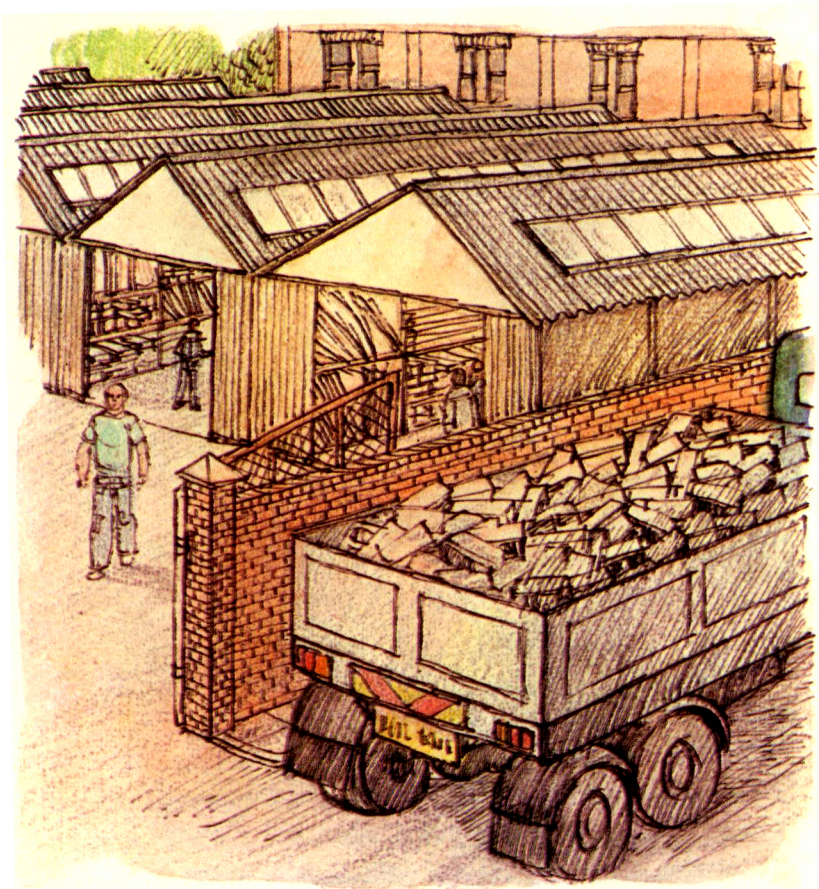
Tim nodded.

“I guessed as much, when you came into the café,” said Simon. “I’m glad I found you. Why are you going north?”

“I’m taking the children up to their grandfather,” said Tim. “The wind witches are after them.”

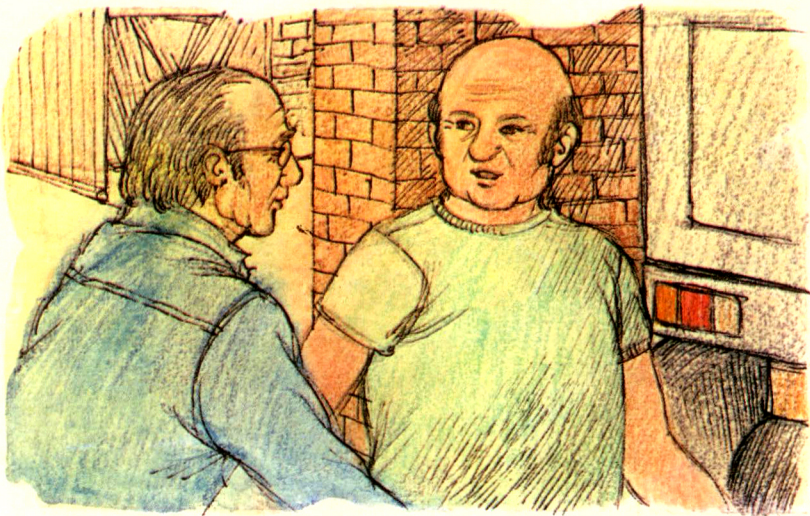
“That’s bad,” said Simon. He thought for a moment. “We’ve got to get you away from here,” he said. “And we’ve got to stop the witches if we can. There’s only one way to stop them. We must change the wind. I know a safe witch not far from here. She could change the wind, if she will. I’ll put you on a lorry that will take you up north as fast as any wind witches can ride, and then I’ll go and see the safe witch, and we’ll change the wind.

“You’ll be all right then. They won’t be able to catch you. But go north as fast as ever you can. We shan’t be able to change the wind for very long. The south wind will blow again in a day or two.”



Simon started up the lorry again, and drove on along the road until he came to a builder's yard, with three large sheds in it. A big lorry was standing by the gate.

Simon pulled up, and got out. As he did so, a man came out of one of the sheds, and walked towards the lorry.



“Hallo, Simon,” he said. “What are you doing here at this time of day?”

“There’s a young friend of mine wants to go up north,” said Simon. “Can you help him on his way, Bill?”

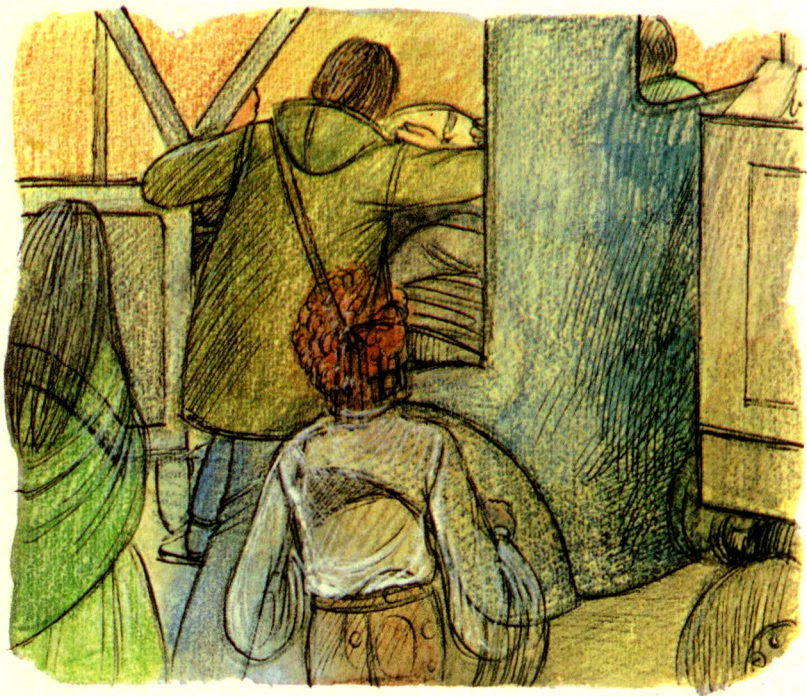
“I might,” said Bill. “Where is he?”

Tim got out of the cab.

“Going up north, are you?” said Bill. “Well, I’m just going across to a transport café on the main road. You come with me. I’m not going north myself, but you’ll find someone there who’ll take you.”

“He’s got a cat with him,” said Simon, as Sebastian jumped out of the cab.

Bill laughed. “All right,” he said. “See you tonight, Simon. Come on, Dick Whittington, I’ll take you and your cat too.”

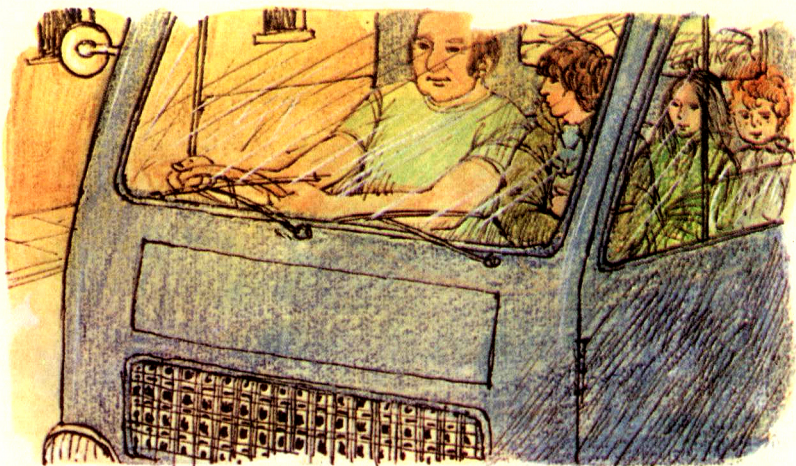


Nicola and Jeremy slipped out of the cab behind Tim. Bill didn't even look at them, so Tim knew that he couldn't see them. He climbed up into the cab beside Bill, and Nicola and Jeremy slipped in with him, and made themselves as small as they could. It was a big cab, so there was just room for them.

Simon lifted Sebastian on to Tim's knees.

"Good luck!" he said. "I'm glad you're on your way. I'll be getting along, too."

He waved to them, as Bill started the engine, and they set off.



“Where are you going?” asked Bill, as he swung the big lorry on to the road.

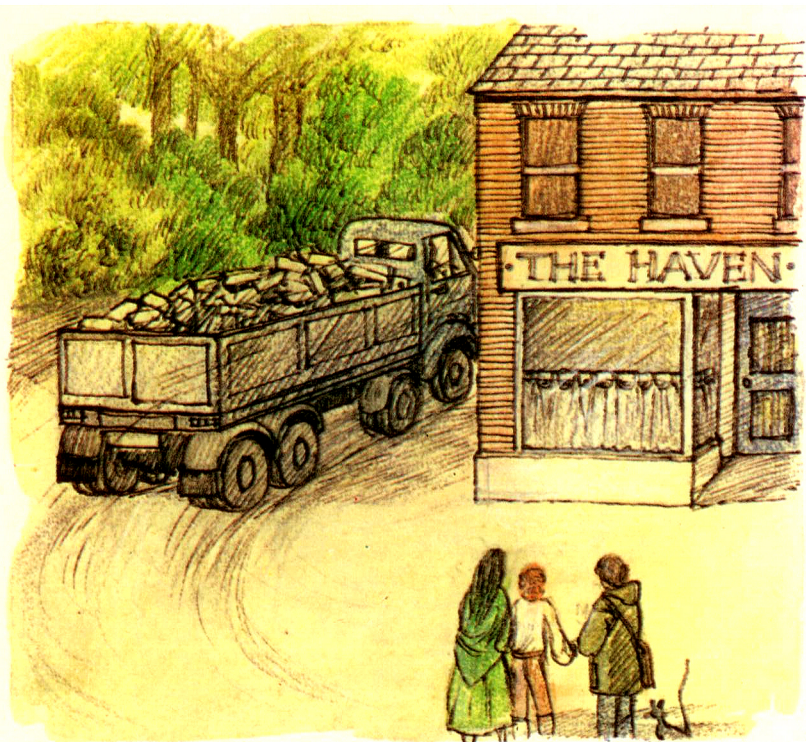
“Up to Scotland,” said Tim. “I’m going to stay with a friend.”

“It’s a long way,” said Bill. “But some of the lorries that stop at the transport café on the main road go right up to Scotland.”

“Where do you go?” asked Tim.

“Oh, I only drive around here,” said Bill. “I work for a builder. They’re building a new room on to the café, and I’m taking some blocks up to them now.”

Bill went on talking about his work, and Tim said as little as he could. After some time, they came to a big main road. Bill turned north along it, and stopped at a big café. There were a lot of cars and lorries parked beside it.



“You go and see if you can find anyone going north,” said Bill. “I’m going to dump my blocks. If you can’t find anyone, come round the back. You’ll see me there, and I’ll find someone for you. O.K.?”

“Thanks very much,” said Tim.

He opened the door of the cab. Nicola and Jeremy slipped out, and Tim climbed down after them. Sebastian jumped down beside him.

Bill nodded to Tim. Tim slammed the door, and Bill drove the lorry round to the back of the café.

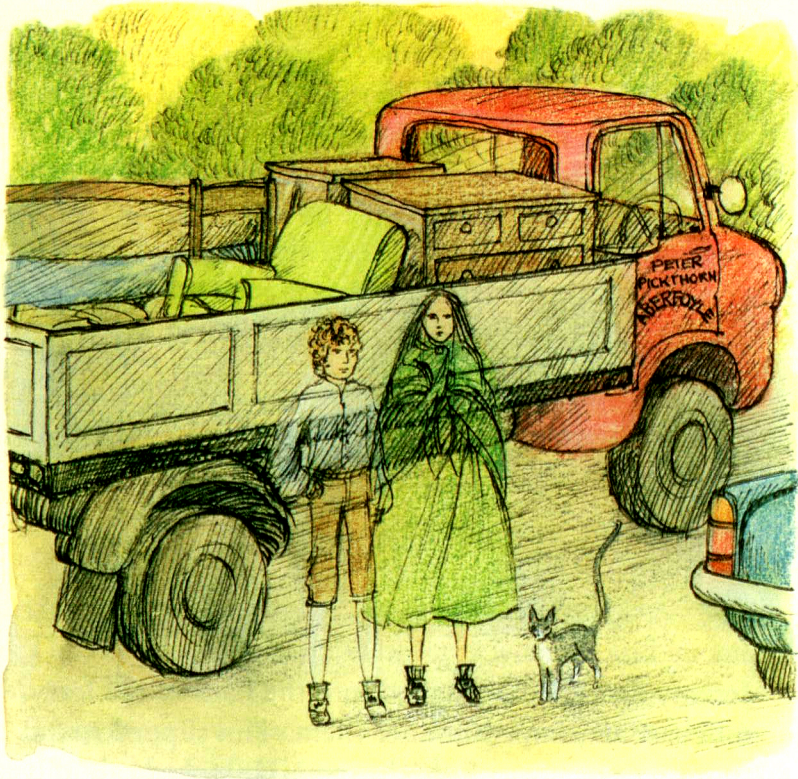


“You go and see what you can find,” Tim said to the children. “Look for a lorry that’s going north. I’ll see if I can buy something to take with us, to eat on the way. I won’t be long.”

“All right,” said Nicola. “But Tim – we’re going to be all right. Didn’t you notice? The wind’s dropped!”

“So it has,” said Tim. “We’ll be all right now. All we need is a fast lorry, going north. We’ll get in front of the witches again, and they won’t be able to catch up with us. You find a lorry. I won’t be long.”

He ran off to the café.



He was soon back with a packet of biscuits and some bars of chocolate.

He found Jeremy, Nicola and Sebastian standing beside a small, open lorry at the side of the car park. There were some cupboards in the back of it, two or three carpets, some chairs, and a pile of sacks.

Tim looked at the name printed on the door. It said: 'Peter Pickthorn, Aberfoyle'.

“Will this do?” asked Nicola.

“Yes, that’s fine,” said Tim. “It’s a real find. It’s going right through to Scotland. That’s where we want to be. You get in. I’ll slip round to the other side and climb in when no one’s looking. I can hide under those sacks, till the driver comes back. He won’t be able to see me, once we’ve started.”



Jeremy and Nicola climbed into the back of the lorry, and Sebastian jumped in after them. Tim slipped round to the other side, away from the road. He looked carefully around. No one was about. He gripped the side of the lorry and pulled himself up. He got a foothold, swung himself up, and fell over the side on to the sacks, beside Jeremy.

Nicola was watching the yard.

“Did anyone see me?” asked Tim.

Nicola shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said.

“But there’s someone coming.”

Tim covered himself with sacks.

He was only just in time. Steps sounded on the stones by the lorry. The door of the cab opened, and someone climbed in. The cab door slammed to, and the lorry swung out on the road.

Tim came out from under the sacks. He was careful to keep to one side, where the driver couldn't see him if he looked back through the window of the cab.

Sebastian kept out of sight too, and Nicola sat down on the carpets, beside Tim. But Jeremy sat in an old arm-chair, looking out at the passing cars.

"You'd better keep down, Jeremy," said Nicola. "There may be Strange Ones or Hidden People on the road."

Jeremy joined them on the carpets. The three of them settled down to wait, and Sebastian climbed on to a box between two cupboards, to keep a look out.

The time passed slowly. The lorry went on and on and on.

They ate a few biscuits at mid-day, and sat watching the road. Hour after hour went by.

"How far do you think he's going?" asked Jeremy at last.

"I don't know," said Tim. "He could be going all the way to Aberfoyle. That's what it said on the cab. Aberfoyle's in Scotland. Aunt May had a calendar with a picture of Aberfoyle on it. If he goes all the way to Aberfoyle, we'll be at the cove in a few days, even if we have to do a lot of walking."

“The sun will be setting soon,” said Nicola. “Melinda told us to hide at night.”

“We can hide on this lorry,” said Tim. “We can all get under the sacks, so that the wind witches can’t see us, if they’ve come as far as this. I don’t want to leave the lorry, when it’s going so far north. We might not find another that was half as good.”

“But – Melinda said, ‘Don’t travel at night’,” said Nicola. “We must get off before it’s dark, Tim. We must. It’s not safe.”

“We can’t stop the lorry and ask the man to let us off,” said Tim.

“But the sun is beginning to set,” said Nicola. Tim could see that she was frightened.

“All right,” he said. “We’ll get off as soon as we can.”

The lorry slowed down, swung on to another road, and began to speed up again.

Tim saw a road sign on the side as they went by.

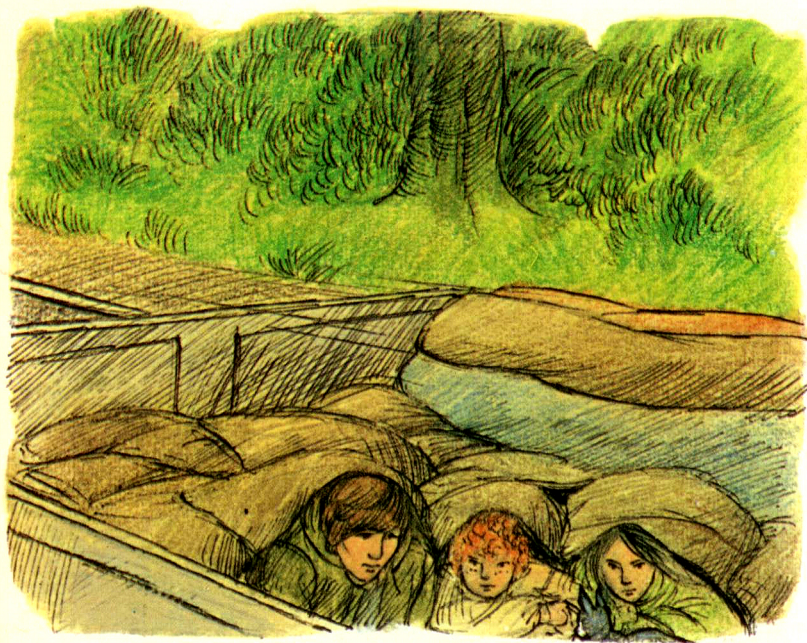
“It’s no good, Nicola. We’ll have to stay where we are for a bit,” he said. “We’re going on to the motorway.”

He sat back. “Have something to eat,” he said. “You’ll feel better, then. We haven’t had anything for a long time.”

Tim pulled out some bars of chocolate, and handed them round. Even Sebastian ate some.

They settled down on the carpets to wait.

The sun set, and the light began to fade from the sky.



Tim pulled the sacks up over the three of them, partly because it was cold, and partly to hide from anyone watching the road. Sebastian slipped in under the sacks with them.

“Let’s try and sleep,” said Tim. “We shall wake if the lorry stops.”

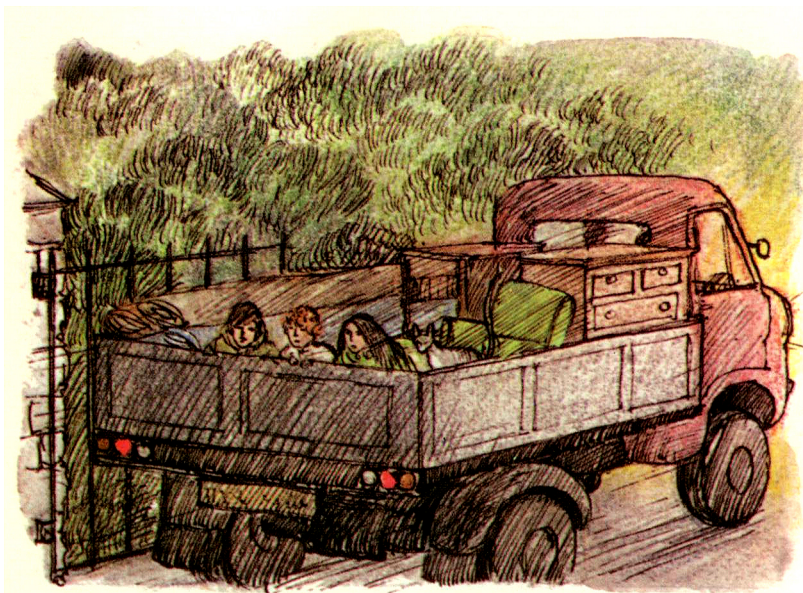
Nicola and Jeremy had slept well the night before, but even they felt tired, and Tim couldn’t keep his eyes open. It was warm under the sacks.

At first, they listened to the roar of the cars and lorries on the motorway. But the sound soon faded into their dreams, as they fell asleep.



Tim woke with a start. The lorry had stopped. He slipped out from under the sacks, and looked over the side. It was very dark, but the lights of the lorry shone on some iron gates.

The driver got down from the cab, went over to the gates, and opened them.



“Quick,” Tim whispered to Nicola. “We’ll slip out when he gets out to shut the gates.”

Jeremy and Nicola were both awake. They slipped out from under the sacks, and moved to the side of the lorry, but they were too late.

The driver got in, and drove on. He didn’t stop again. He left the gates open behind him.

There were trees and bushes on each side of them in the darkness.

Then Tim saw lights ahead, and the lorry pulled up in front of a big stone house. Tim thought that it looked a bit like a small castle. He could see a tower at one corner. There were stone steps, too, leading up to a big, wooden door.



As Tim looked, the door opened, and a man came down the steps. He was a tall, thin man, with dark hair. He was wearing strange clothes. He had a red cut-away coat, a little horn hanging on a silver chain around his neck, and a crutch under one arm. He halted on each step, as he came down towards the lorry.

Tim dropped back beside the others. His hands were shaking. The man had only one leg.



The driver jumped down from his cab, and went round to the back of the lorry. He let the tailboard down.

The man with one leg looked in. He looked at Tim for a moment, and then at Nicola and Jeremy. Tim knew that he could see all three of them.

“Well,” he said. “So you’ve come at last. I’ve been waiting for you. Come inside.”

Nicola looked round wildly, looking for somewhere safe to run to.

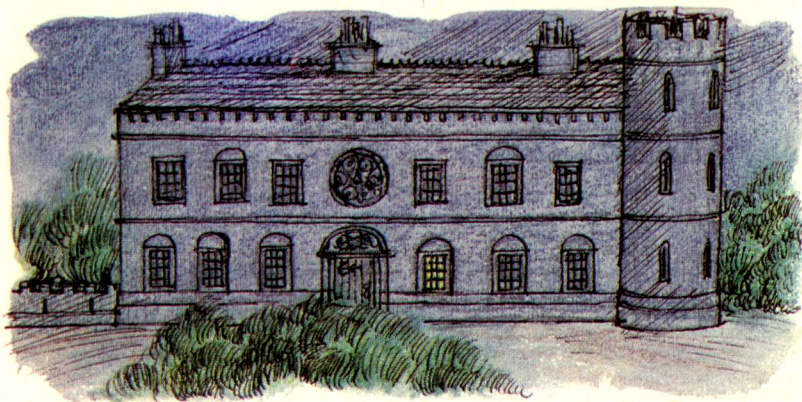
The man put the horn to his lips, and blew. Three men came running around the side of the house. One of them had a big dog with him, on a short chain. They stopped at one side of the lorry.

“I think you had better come inside,” said the man with one leg. “You will be much safer there.”

Nicola and Jeremy and Tim climbed slowly out of the back of the lorry. They walked up the steps and in at the door without saying a word.

It wasn't until they were inside the door, that Tim remembered Sebastian. He looked back through the doorway. The driver was taking the lorry round to the back of the house. Wherever Sebastian was, no one had seen him.

Tim felt better. He turned, and followed Nicola and Jeremy into the big stone hall.



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